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NATIVE BALLADRY IN AMERICA

BY PHILLIPS BARRY

"THOSE who hold to the doctrine (more or less modified) of the communal origin of ballads, are inclined to doubt the existence of native American balladry."¹ And it is quite true that out of the abundance of folk-song now circulating in this country, — a statement of fact no longer to be regarded with incredulity, — the greater part is British, comprising specimens not only of the so-called "popular" ballad,² but also of the later balladry native to Britain, which — granting that in origin, as is by no means certain,³ it may sometimes have been different — is in its present condition "communal." Yet there is a certain proportion which is of our soil. The value of this small proportion, though of meagre worth when judged by literary standards and contrasted with "Earl Brand" or "King Estmere," — beside which it may well seem but trivial stuff, — is great when approached from the viewpoint of the seeker after truth, by reason of the light it sheds on the process by which ballads come to be.

"Das Volk dichtet" is as true as ever. Yet not of communal *composition*. "It is unlikely that even the simplest of our extant ballads were made in this fashion."⁴ The process is rather one of individual invention, *plus* communal re-creation. One needs only to observe, as a matter of every-day life, how the story of the most commonplace event, when told by one person to another, changes its form, and gathers about itself incidents with which the original event had nothing to do.⁵ So with a ballad, the individual invents, — composes; the community edits, and recomposes. In a word, the part of the folk in the process of ballad-making is *accessory after the fact*. That a given version of a ballad differs from another is due to the fact that every version has been through a process, lasting, it may be, for years or generations, of re-creation in the minds of the folk-singers.

It is the subsequent history that distinguishes "Sir Patrick Spens" from "The Wreck of the Hesperus."

A few facts concerning our native balladry, with selected specimens of ballads, may here be put in evidence.

¹ H. M. Belden, "The Study of Folk-Song in America," *Modern Philology*, April, 1905, ii, 4, p. 576.

² The following items, corresponding to numbers in Professor Child's collections, have been recorded in America: Nos. 2, 3, 4, 7, 10, 12, 18, 20, 26, 27, 45, 49, 53, 68, 73, 74, 75, 76, 79, 84, 85, 93, 95, 106, 110, 155, 162, 181, 188, 200, 209, 210, 214, 221, 243, 250, 274, 277, 278, 279, 281, 285, 286, 287, 289, 295.

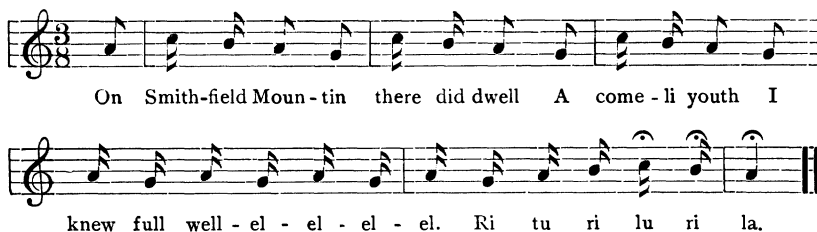
³ That is, raising the question whether or not the original text was committed to writing.

⁴ G. L. Kittredge, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, p. xix.

⁵ Compare John Byrom, *The Three Black Crows*.

I. SPRINGFIELD MOUNTAIN

This trivial ditty, *communal*, as far as its present condition is concerned, and thereby, except by reason of its lesser age, not less deserving of the epithet than "Lord Randall," is one of the few ballads that can be traced back to its origin. The author is said to have been Nathan Torrey, of Springfield, Mass., who composed the ballad about the year 1761.¹ It is now widely current among folk-singers;² and a great many versions have been recorded, all differing more or less from one another, as well as from the original.³ The following, with its quaint Æolian air, is worthy of inclusion here.



1. On Smithfield Mountain
There did dwell
A comeli youth I knew full well
ell ell. Ri tu ri nu ri na.

¹ This is the account given by David A. Wells at the Springfield anniversary banquet, May, 1886 (*Springfield Republican*, Oct. 4, 1908). J. G. Holland, however, ascribes the authorship to "a young woman to whom the unfortunate man was engaged to be married" (*History of Western Massachusetts*). The incident celebrated in the ballad is the death from a snake-bite of Timothy, son of Lieutenant Mirick, of Springfield Mountain, now Wilbraham, Mass., Aug. 7, 1761.

The original version of the ballad is of course unobtainable. Three crude versions, which are unquestionably not far removed from it, give nine stanzas which may safely be assumed to have come from no other source. These versions are,—

(a) Mr. Wells's version, according to his belief the most authentic (*Springfield Republican*, June 6, 1886).

(b) Mr. Holland's version, "an authentic copy preserved in the family" (*Ibid.*).

(c) A version contributed by Miss Cordelia Fuller of Danbury, Conn., to the *Springfield Republican* (Oct. 4, 1908), as learned from her grandmother.

The distribution of stanzas is as follows:—

(a) Stanzas	1	2	3	9	—	6	—	8
(b) "	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
(c) "	1	2	3	4	5	—	7	—

Variations in language are very slight. All three give the name Mirick, or Merrick. Two (a and b, in stanza 8) give the date.

Whether the author was Torrey or the unknown "young woman" matters little. The important point is the fact of the tradition of individual authorship of the ballad.

² As far west as Wisconsin.

³ W. W. Newell, "Early American Ballads," *Journal of American Folk-Lore*, vol. xiii, pp. 107-112; see also my article, "Traditional Ballads in New England," *Ibid.* vol. xviii, pp. 295-302.

2. One Mondi mornin
He did go
Out to the medder for to mow
ow, ow. Ri tu ri nu ri na.
3. Scarce had he mowed
Across the fiel
When a pizen sarpint bit his heel
eel, eel. Ri tu ri nu ri na.
4. "Oh, Maury Ann
Oh don't you see
A great big sarpint done bit me
me me. Ri tu ri nu ri na."¹

II. FAIR CHARLOTTE

No printed version of this ballad has ever been discovered, and there is no reason to believe that any exists. Its origin, therefore, goes back to some village poet or folk-singer. That the recorded versions do not differ so widely from one another, as is the case with "Springfield Mountain," is no doubt due to the fact that the process of re-creation by the folk has not extended over so long a period of time, covering, perhaps, a period not exceeding forty years. I have records of "Fair Charlotte" from Maine, Vermont, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania. It is current also in the Western States.²



Fair Char-lotte lived by the moun - tain side, In a wild and lone - ly



spot. No dwelling was for three miles round, Beside her fa - ther's cot.

1. Fair Charlotte lived by the mountain side
In a wild and lonely spot,
No dwelling was for three miles round
Beside her father's cot.
2. And yet on many a wintry night,
Young swains would gather there,

¹ "Springfield Mountain," J, *Folk-Songs of the North Atlantic States*, contributed by S. A. F., Providence, R. I.

² H. M. Belden, *l. c.* p. 576. "Young Charlotte, well known in Missouri, reported by Professor Lewis of Chicago as known to him in childhood (though by another name) in New Jersey, . . . and recently communicated to me from Wisconsin."

Her father kept a social board,
For she was very fair.

3. Her father loved to see her dress
Gay as a city belle,
She was the only child he had,
And he loved his daughter well.
4. It was New Year's night, the sun was down,
Why looked her anxious eye
So oft from the cottage window forth,
As the evening shades drew nigh?
5. At a village inn, fifteen miles off,
Was a merry ball that night,
The winds without were as cold as death,
But her heart was warm and light.
6. How brightly beamed her laughing eye
As the well-known sound she heard,
When driving up to the cottage door
Young Charlie's sleigh appeared.
7. "O daughter dear," her mother said,
"This blanket round you fold,
It is a dreadful night without,
And you'll catch a fatal cold."
8. "Oh, no, no, no!" fair Charlotte said,
And she laughed like a gypsy queen,
"To ride in blankets muffled up,
I never can be seen."
9. "My silken cloak is quite enough,
You know, 't is lined throughout,
Beside, I have a silken shawl
To tie my neck about."
10. Her bonnet and her shawl were on,
She stepped into the sleigh,
And away they ride by the mountain side,
And over the hills away.
11. There's life in the sound of the merry bells,
As over the hills they go,
What a creaking noise the runners make,
As they bite the frozen snow!
12. Along the bleak and dreary way
How keen the winds do blow,

The stars did never shine so bright,
How creaks the frozen snow!

13. Along the bleak and dreary way
Five lonely miles they passed,
When Charles in a few and frozen words
The silence broke at last.
14. "Such a night as this I never knew,
The reins I scarce can hold,"
Fair Charlotte said in a feeble voice,
"I am exceeding cold."
15. He cracked his whip, and urged his team
More swiftly than before,
Until five other lonely miles
In silence they passed o'er.
16. "How fast," said Charles, "the freezing ice
Is gathering on my brows,"
Fair Charlotte said in a feeble voice,
"I'm getting warmer now."
17. Away they ride through the frozen air
In the glittering starry light,
Until at length the village inn
And the ball-room was in sight.
18. They reached the door, young Charles stepped out,
And held his hand to her,
"Why sit you there like a monument
That hath no power to stir?"
19. He called her once, he called her twice,
She uttered not a word,
He held his hand again to her,
But still she never stirred.
20. He took her hand within his own,
It was cold and like a stone,
He tore the veil from off her face,
The moonlight on it shone.
21. Then swiftly through the lighted hall
Her lifeless form he bore,
Fair Charlotte was a stiffened corpse,
And words spake never more.
22. Now, ladies, when you hear of this,
Think of that dreadful night,

And never venture so thinly clad
On such a winter's night.¹

III. FAIR FLORELLA

Similarly, of this ballad, no printed copy is known. Doubtless it originated in the same way, as the composition of some humble folk-singer, from whom it was transmitted to others. As is the case with the preceding, it has obtained a wide currency, and shows evidence of a process of re-creation rather more extensive. I have noted down four versions in New England, two of which are here printed. The ballad is current in the West and South in versions differing widely from any hitherto recorded in the Eastern States.²

FIRST VERSION



1. Down by yon weeping willow,
Where flowers so sweetly bloom,
There sleeps the fair Florilla,
So silent in her tomb.
2. She died not broken-hearted,
Nor sickness e'er befell,
But in one moment parted
From all she loved so well.
3. One night the moon shone brightly,
And gentle zephyrs blew,
Up to her cottage lightly
Her treacherous lover drew.
4. He says, "Come let us wander,
In those dark woods we'll stray,
And there we'll sit and ponder
Upon our wedding-day."

¹ "Fair Charlotte," D, *Folk-Songs of the North Atlantic States*. From N. A. C., Rome, Pa., as learned "from a schoolmate, some twenty-five years ago, or perhaps more" (March 12, 1907).

² G. L. Kittredge, "Ballads and Rhymes from Kentucky," *Journal of American Folk-Lore*, vol. xx, p. 264.

5. "Those woods look dark and dreary,
I am afraid to stray,
Of wandering I am weary,
So I'll retrace my way."
6. "Those woods, those gentle zephyrs,
Your feet no more will roam,
So bid adieu forever
To parents, friends, and home."
7. Down on her knees before him
She begged for her life,
When deep into her bosom
He plunged that hateful knife.
8. "O William! I'll forgive you,"
Was her last dying breath,
Her pulses ceased their motion,
Her eyes were closed in death.
9. Down by yon weeping willow,
Where flowers so sweetly bloom,
There sleeps that fair Florilla,
So silent in her tomb.¹

SECOND VERSION ²



1. One eve as the moon shone brightly
And zephyrs gentle bloom,
Unto her cot so lightly,
Her treacherous lover had flown.
2. "Come, love, come let us wander
Upon yon fields so gay,
Come, love, come let us ponder
Unto our wedding-day."

¹ "Fair Florella," A, *Folk-Songs of the North Atlantic States*. From H. J. C., Concord, N. H., 1908. In version B (from L. N. C., Boston, Mass.) the closing stanza points a moral: —

Come all ye pretty maidens,
A warning take this day,
Don't trust your hearts to young men,
For they will you betray.

² This version is an excellent example of the "ballad of situation."

3. "This road seems dark and dreary,
And I'm afraid to stay,
Of wandering I am weary,
Wilt thou retrace thy way?"
4. "Retrace thy way, — no, never!
Nor to give this world to know,
So bid farewell forever,
To parents, friends, and home."
5. "For in these fields I've got you,
And here you've got to die,
No power on earth can save you,
Nor from me can you fly."
6. Down on her knees before him
She begged him for her life,
Deep, deep into her bosom
He plunged that fatal knife.
7. "Oh, Willie, dear, I've loved you
With a fond and loving heart,
But, Willie, you've deceived me,
So now in death we part!"¹

These examples will suffice. American ballads, even the oldest of them, are still young, and the re-creative process has not been going on as long as is the case with the native balladry of Britain. Moreover, the heroic days of folk-song have vanished: hence the wide difference in literary worth, but not in kind. The process of ballad-making has not changed, nor will it change. Ballads of still more recent date are current in the West, as "Jesse James," "Casey Jones,"² and some others. The subjects of our native ballads — simple events in human experience — are the usual ones in folk-song, since people live, grow, love, and die, much as they did when the world was very young.³

¹ "Fair Florella," D, *Folk-Songs of the North Atlantic States*. Melody from H. I. C., West Campton, N. H., Sept. 3, 1908; words ("Fair Aurilla") copied by me, Oct. 5, 1908, from MS. of E. T. (sister of H. I. C.), West Campton, N. H. H. I. C., who recalled only fragments of the ballad, sang the following additional stanza: —

"Dear Willie, I forgive you,"
(Her last and dying words!)
She gave one look of pity,
And closed her eyes in death.

² A ballad of a wreck on the Illinois Central Railroad, beginning

"Come all you rounders, for I want you to hear
The story told of an engineer.
Casey Jones was the rounder's name,
A heavy right-wheeler of mighty fame."

The Railroad Man's Magazine, May, 1908, p. 764.

³ "The Burial at Sea" is worthy of passing notice. Ascribed in Fulton and Trueblood's

Many ballads based on early American political history have existed, — Shays' Rebellion was made into a ballad before 1790,¹ — but of these, "Paul Jones," known equally well to British and American folk-singers, is almost the only survivor. No doubt, many ballads have never enjoyed more than a local currency, yet it might at any time be the fate of such a ballad to acquire the wide dispersion of "Springfield Mountain." Why one ballad should live, and another perish, no one can say. The fact of native American balladry remains.

Choice Readings (p. 169) to Capt. W. H. Saunders, U. S. N., elsewhere to Rev. E. H. Chapin (*Portland Transcript*, 1894, answer to query 823), it has for fifty years been a favorite of folk-singers in the Eastern States. Broadside copies are numerous. In the West, transformed into "The Lone Prairie," it is widely current in many different versions, yet retaining enough similarities to its prototype to show its origin: e. g.,

The Burial at Sea

Oh, bury me not in the deep, deep sea,
Where the billow's shroud shall roll o'er me,
Where no light can break through the dark, cold wave,
Or the sun shine sweetly upon my grave.

C. from O. F. A. C., Harrisburg, Pa. (*Folk-Songs of the North Atlantic States*).

The Lone Prairie

Oh, bury me not on the lone prairie,
Where the wild coyote will howl o'er me,
Where the rattlesnakes hiss and the winds blow free,
Oh, bury me not on the lone prairie!"

(Communicated by Professor Henry M. Belden, Columbia, Mo., as recalled by an engineer who learned it in Kansas.)

A version of "The Lone Prairie" from Texas has been printed in this Journal (vol. xiv, p. 186.)

¹ Charles B. Webster, *Under Colonial Roofs*, p. 11.